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# **Religion and Development: Tracing the Trajectories of an Evolving Sub-discipline**

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## **Abstract:**

Religion and development (RaD) has emerged as a new academic sub-discipline since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, following decades of secular assumptions and attitudes dominating development studies, and international development more broadly. In 2018 there is little doubt that religion has been incorporated into development studies and it is therefore timely to re-appraise religion and development. Recent scholarship suggests that RaD increasingly informs, engage withs and influences development studies and development practice; providing rich empirical material, broader disciplinary engagement, and deeper analytical insight. Drawing on a survey of almost – mainly English language - 700 publications this article traces the emergence and establishment of RaD. The article traces the emergence of the field (2000-2010) and then its subsequent more critical engagement with development studies (between 2011 and 2018). The article concludes by identifying five emerging contemporary research themes within RaD and future research opportunities.

## **1. Introduction**

There is a value in reflecting on the ontology of an academic discipline (or as in this case, sub-discipline) and its own old and new directions. This exercise allows us to grapple internal and external ideologies that may still influence academic and practical choices and trace issues of power and power relations that may exist within the disciplinary framework. It also allows us to unpack demands from the bottom and questions from the applied world that may have shape those changes as well as to understand how theoretical thinking evolved navigating assumptions and values brought in by contextual conceptualizations. In light of this exercise, this article provides a space to reflect on the sub-discipline of religion and development (RaD) as a whole and the way in the past 20 years it evolved and reconciled with the overall secular discipline of development studies.

Since religion properly entered the realm of development studies at turn with the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it challenged many assumptions and began to shape theories and practice of international development in new ways. When we consider the emergence of the sub-field of religion and development, it becomes apparent that 9/11 marked a sort of watershed to non-academic circles highlighting in the most graphic way possible how religion could no longer being excluded from political and social analyses that sought to address emerging global challenges. In the years that followed academics working on religion from many perspectives were spurred by both policy demand and intellectual supply. Academics experienced calls to produce more analyses that re-centred religion as a driver of public action and positive, or some cases negative, change. New centres for the study of religion and development emerged as for

example the Birmingham based RaD Consortium funded by the UK's Department for International Development (2005-2010) and the Berkley's 'Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs' at Georgetown University, created within the Office of the US President in 2006. The Centre, led by Katherine Marshall, is dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of religion, development, politics and ethics. The numbers of academic and non-academic publications started to grow in those years and they continue to do so, while publishers even started to offer special series on religion and development (see for example the Routledge series 'Research in Religion in Development'). The 'turn to religion', as it has been defined, brought in the idea that lived religious experiences and organisations far from being a problem have instead the potential to keep opening up further questions that may have the power to push and challenge other core assumptions within development studies and other disciplines, and help engage with the people and institutions who practice international development in productive new ways.

In the recent era of post-secular enquiry, this article represents the most exhaustive attempt to map and analyze RaD publications produced in English (and some in French and German) in the form of books, book chapters, peer-reviewed articles and other material (including PhD theses, official reports, working papers) in order to identify changes, trends and new directions. The analysis was conducted using a bibliography of 675 sources categorized into two timeframes of 2006-2010 and 2011-2017. Each source was coded for their author(s)'s location, year and type of publication and summarized with the support of an assistant researcher and librarians at the University of Edinburgh. These publications were identified through the use of several engines as DiscoverEd, British Library for Development Studies, Google scholar, European Library and WorldCat. The location of each publication was categorized into continental 'regions'. This comparative approach meant it was possible to identify a diversification in their regional origins over the last decade. In post-2011 it emerged European countries published proportionally more works on the topic while North America was the dominant location of publication in the earlier period. This increase can mainly be attributed to Germany and the Nordic countries, where governments had started to increasingly invest more in faith-inspired development organisations, producing significantly more literature and interest in the topic as a consequence. Germany's contributions have more than tripled while the Nordic contribution has increased almost ten-fold. Oceania also witnesses a marked rise in the proportion of publications. This is largely accounted for by Australia's input which has risen from 5 publications in 2006-2010 to 38 works between 2011 and 2017. In this second phase is also possible to observe a more general diversification in terms of regional production with some African countries catching up in terms of published outcomes. In terms of the type of publications, it is possible to discern a shift towards academic articles as the main form of publication, away from books and reports in the earlier period.

From an analysis of the literature in the past 20-years, it is clear that 2005-2006 are the years in which, given the rise in the number of publications and the debates sparked, we can really discern the establishment of the sub-discipline. Within that decade long period, the article identifies 2011 as a sort of inflection point that determines a few important shifts and changes within RaD. In fact, drawing upon an analysis of the RaD literature it seems that half a decade of initial publications, 2005/2006 to 2011, signaled an assertion of a proper space within development studies and the building of a base that allowed RaD to move in new directions with an attention to function over definition and justification, as the article will explain later. Within this later period of diversification, it is possible to identify a few very new and recent

trends and trajectories occurring within the discipline and highlight a few emerging intellectual debates that will be illustrated in the last section of the article.

## **2. The Evolution of RaD scholarship**

Between 2005 and 2010 the RaD literature was strongly dominated by critiques of secularisation theories and its latent underpinning of development thinking (ter Haar and Ellis, 2006; Casanova, 2006; Tomalin, 2007; James, 2009; Deneulin and Bano, 2009; Mesbahuddin, 2010; Chan, 2010; Bompani and Frahm-Arp, 2010; Terr Harr, 2011; Bradley, 2011). For example, Rakodi and Deneulin in their (2010 online publication; paper in 2011) *World Development* article, following a critique of the way religion was at first quite timidly discussed and then completely abandoned within the development framework 30 years ago, called for a revisiting of the assumptions of secularization and secularism that supposedly defined the relationships between religion, society, and politics. They also called for development studies to recognize religion as a dynamic and heterogeneous force within broader processes of development.

In those early years these kind of critiques were necessary in order to carve a space within the development studies literature that had excluded religion *a priori* in light of a unifying understanding of how development should proceed and be implemented following a European and North American secular model (Rakodi and Deneulin, 2011) and in the historical context of centuries of suspicion from the development and policy sectors towards the (so called irrational) role that religion could play in the public. There was a compelling need to say, to those ones who had denied it, that religion mattered.

In these early analyses, it was repeatedly argued that the lingering secular, western, neoliberal biases in development thinking fostered an approach which neglected religion and tried to apply ill-fitting, ethnocentric concepts globally (Tyndale, 2006; Rakodi, 2007; Zaman, 2008; Clarke and Jennings, 2008; Maharaj, 2008; Amenga-Etego, 2008; Moret, 2008; De Cordier, 2009; Al-Jabri, 2009; Casanova, 2009; Bompani and Frahm-Arp, 2010; Rees, 2011; Tadros, 2011; Amenga-Etego, 2011). Therefore, through this five-year period we see many demands for a new academic methodology and approach to development which would take religion seriously. The framing of these early analyses, though, highlight how religion in those first years was regularly treated instrumentally as a resource to be harnessed in the pursuit of development goals. It is worth noticing that the pre-2011 literature clearly featured an institutional and sometimes pragmatic focus, including interest in the workings of increased donor partnerships with Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs). This earlier period often saw efforts to sort organisations and types of religious denominations into categories (see Clarke and Jennings, 2008 and Clarke 2006). And again, this was mostly dictated by the need to produce a clear set of tools, categories and a comprehensible language for the mostly faith-illiterate and sometimes faith-scared academics, development practitioners and donors. Also influential in earlier years was a focus on institutional partnerships with religious groups (Olson, 2008) and with states/governments (Nolte, 2009; Suberu, 2009; Goodhand, 2009; Haynes, 2010; Swart, 2010; Hibbard, 2010). This institutional focus was later - from 2011 onwards - replaced by emphasis on individual agency and lived faith experience (Parsitau, 2011; Ter Harr, 2011) and it is perhaps at this time that we can discern a shift from quantity of interaction to quality of experience.

Between 2006 and 2008 we witness publications which addressed the question of whether religion was a help or hindrance to development efforts (Marshall and Taylor, 2006; Hopkins

and Patel, 2006; Para-Mallam, 2006; Haar and Ellis 2006; Gardner, 2006; Haynes, 2007; McCleary, 2008; Woodberry, 2008; Lunn, 2009; De Kadt, 2009; Sterkens, 2009; and a bit later Balogun, 2010; Facchini, 2010); with many analyses arguing that religion presented resources to be harnessed for the good of development goals including the mobilisation of large social groups (Marshall and Taylor, 2006; Hopkins and Patel, 2006; Gardner, 2006; Hoodfar, 2007; Amenga-Etego, 2008; Terr Harr, 2011; Amenga-Etego, 2011). These debates do not seem so prevalent in more recent publications given that those earlier discussions have mainly been resolved with the quite unsurprising answer: ‘it depends’. Most importantly, the last five years of literature has tended to depart from these earlier examinations of how religion helps or hinders development, towards looking at how these factors, among others, mutually influence one another in different contexts.

Post those earlier years in which RaD had to gain and defend the legitimacy of religion within international development and development studies, 2009-2011 saw a move towards understanding the ways in which religion was intimately woven into people’s identities and everyday lives, both individually and collectively. Just as one’s religious identity affects attitudes and actions towards states, institutions and development efforts, so too do these forces shape religious experience and identity (Donnelly, 2013; Gordon, 2013; Zaag, 2013). Scholarship started to offer explanations that defined religion as “embodied” (Deneulin and Bano, 2009); “embedded” (Bompani and Frahm-Arp, 2010); and in terms of religious ideologies that worked as “prisms” (Terr Harr, 2010). In this way, authors looked to situate religion as a sphere which interacts with all areas of life including gender (for example, some of Tomalin and Bradley’s work resonate with that), politics, and development. Many authors, between 2009-2016, argued that an empirical - particularly ethnographic - method was key to understanding the complex workings of religion in multiple, varied contexts (Hefferans, Adkins and Occhipinti, 2009; Bradley, 2009; Bompani and Frahm-Arp, 2010; Bradley, 2011; Tugal, 2012; Fountain, 2013; Walsh, 2015; Marshall, 2015; Narayanan, 2015).

This conversation that brought to perceive religion in a multifaceted way was part of a larger transition which took hold in 2011 in which RaD literature began to turn its attention to function over definition; individual agency and lived faith experience over classification and justifications of religion, and to individual agency and faith experience over institutional partnerships (Rees, 2011; Parsitau et al, 2011; Jones and Petersen, 2011; Balchin, 2011; Terr Harr, 2011). Deneulin and Rakodi’s (2011) seminal article in this journal constructed a comprehensive argument for a replacing of the dominant positivist approach with an interpretivist one which gives credence to the diverse, meaning-making nature of religion. Also departing from positivism, Shoko (2011) argued for the benefits of a phenomenological approach in understanding the lived reality of religious experience. Van Dijk, for example, in his book published in 2014 offered an examination of the ways in which religion and biomedicine co-evolve in the context of AIDS treatment. This is an example of what Katherine Marshall proposes in her 2015 publication, *Religion, Politics, and Economic Development: Synergies and Disconnects*, that is the need to attend to events and situations which showcase the relationship between religion and development. Overall, this the period in which we find growing support for the contextualisation of RaD scholarship (Skjortnes, 2014).

The move to a ‘more holistic form of development’, as has been so-defined by this kind of literature, has seen advocacy for locally-led development efforts which use concepts and means to the indigenous communities undergoing development. From 2010/11 onwards, a participatory model, attending to indigenous voices and ideas is a prominent and expanding theme (though there are some notable references in earlier years, e.g. Bradley, 2006; Tomalin,

2007; Casanova, 2009). Advocacy for the use of interpretive indigenous tools to the situation or religion - such as the incorporation of theology in policy making - accompany a call for locally led development (Girma, 2012; Ager, Abebe and Ager, 2014; Cox and Villamajor, 2014; Wilhelm, 2014; Clarke, 2016; Clarke b, 2016). This level of collaboration was said to lend legitimacy to development efforts and improve their sustainability (Levy, 2013).

Answers to the earlier 2006-10 demands for a new methodology emerge in 2011-17 with suggestions such as phenomenological, interpretivist, and feminist approaches. It is at this time that the interface of RaD starts to be understood as complex and multidimensional: a nexus of interrelated factors including gender, politics, economics, urbanization and environment and we will go back to this point later. The multidimensional nature of this field has triggered calls for an interdisciplinary methodology.

At this time, inspiration from and comparisons with feminist methodologies also started to emerge. Those in particular call for taking serious account of the voices of recipients of aid. For example, Wendy Mee (2016) in her article 'The Social Lives of Gender and Religion' suggested that there are many conceptual problems common to the fields of Gender & Development and Religion & Development namely, categorisation, representation and identification. She suggested that the common solution for both fields lies in seeing these spheres as permeable. Perhaps then, upcoming literature might see a further exploration of these common methodological challenges and solutions for issues connected to religion and gender within development.

Found repeatedly through the 2011-2017 literature are demands for contextual, empirical research which would guide more culturally appropriate, enduring development efforts. Critiques emerge in this period of the previous narrow focus on FBOs, among other topics, which were categorised and homogenized (Kanyandago, 2011; Bradley, 2011; Deneulin and Rakodi, 2011; Balchin, 2011; Ferris, 2011; Petersen, 2012; Tomalin, 2012; Fountain, 2013; Jennings, 2013; Johnston, 2013; Butt, 2014; Clarke and Tittensor, 2014; Karam, 2014; Mee, 2016). As a result, literature of the last five years has asked for greater appreciation of diversity of religious groups and organisations and a clear suggestion that academia must learn to work through the complexity of the field rather than neatly organise it into models and categories (Tadros, 2011; Bompani, 2014; Ager and Ager, 2015; Van Klinken, 2015). In accordance with this trend, the literature advocates empirical research that generates contextualization and nuance; country-specific development targets (Al-Nasser, 2015); locally led development efforts (Clarke, 2016); and a greater emphasis on dialogue and interdisciplinary methods. To correct the pre-2011 narrower focus, publications over the past years have asked that development scholars appreciate the vast diversity in religious organisations and faith communities.

Paul Gifford, in his 2015 publication, *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa*, further stretched the need to understand the specificity of the context and of the faith communities under investigation. In his book, Gifford made the point that in contemporary African contexts it is possible to make a distinction between *enchanted Christianity*, the kind of Christianity that poses greater emphasis on the spiritual realm populated by spirits, ancestors and witches and *disenchanted forms of Christianity*, such as for example the Catholic Church, which is more accustomed to work with and operate as 'proper' 'secular' NGOs and is much more familiar with the International Development lingo and values. Gifford (2015)'s provides an example of a study that took seriously the call to better understand the complexity of religion itself, in this case African Christianity.

In the post 2011 academic production, interreligious collaboration is another key trend that is said to be important to ensuring achievement of development goals (DfID, 2012; Al-Nasser, 2015) and the prerequisite peaceful co-existence (Agbiboa, 2013; Lokesh, 2014; Walsh, 2015; Auza, 2016). In particular, this theme of striving for peace and avoiding potential conflict in engaging with religion, sees rather greater attention in 2013-2016. Transnational inter-religious communication is raised as an inevitability in cases such as mass displacement caused by forced migration (Banchoff, 2008) as well as part of finding internal solutions to obstacles posed by some religious teaching (Tomalin, 2009). The theme of collaboration also emerges as part of the introduction of a feminist methodology: talking to the women who are recipients of aid and incorporating their voices in development policy and practice (e.g. Balchin, 2011; Bradley, 2011). Another dimension of this move towards collaboration sees states and institutions (Hearn, 2008; DfID, 2012; Clarke b, 2013) and secular humanitarian organisations (Freeman, 2012; Rennick, 2012; Ager et al) recognize the merit of partnering with faith groups for the achievement of development goals. This increase in collaboration and dialogue is part of the larger movement towards contextualising and rendering more complex development efforts, considering the intimate entanglement of religion in people's lives, and interest in locally led, grassroots development.

### **3. Faith-based Organisations**

Publications on Faith-based Organizations (FBOs), given their size, scope and influence, deserve separate consideration. This exercise is important because FBOs represent one of the tangible areas of overlap between the intellectual concerns of RaD and international development as a field of practice. The study of FBOs provide a space in which multiple dialogues between the field of RaD and the practice of development can take place. The growth of FBOs numbers over the last two decades – as a sub-set of the global growth of non-governmental organisations – has piqued the interest of donors and the possibility of partnerships with international organisations. The literature on FBO is rapidly growing, substantial and somewhat disparate in response.

Many scholars have contributed to the conversation on the unique advantages FBOs hold over their secular counterparts (Benthall, 2006; Tyndale, 2006; Petersen, 2012). It was often suggested that the faith-based nature of these groups allows their work to be more contextually literate and appropriate, operating at grassroots, and effectively embedding in community life (James, 2009; Rennick, 2013). As a result, their development efforts can be seen as more enduring (Freeman, 2012). Furthermore, some stated that FBOs have some advantages in accruing funding as both international organisations and local communities recognise them as particularly effective development actors (e.g. Harper, 2008). FBOs have been said to encourage more holistic development, understanding the significance of spiritual growth and personal dignity (Karam, 2014; Auza, 2015). Moreover, an affinity with religious communities means FBOs can often have access to wide networks of morally motivated people and rich resources which elude secular groups (Herreran, 2007; Clarke and Jennings, 2008; Reinika and Svensson, 2010). While some authors looked also to show how engagement with FBOs may cause civil conflict, tension with the state, or be in-conducive to development principles (McGinnis, 2006; Clarke and Jennings, 2008; Seguino, 2011), we can convincingly say that the main the overall focus of literature has been on their potential as a force for good in development. And from the analysis of thematic regional trends, it seems that this particular kind of research was produced in the USA. Perhaps this was dictated by the need to reflect and provide a solid support to the huge number of Faith-based Organizations already operating in

the country and the Government' shift towards funding under George W. Bush 's presidency from 2001 to 2009.

Alongside this discussion, there are contrary suggestions, emerging in the past five years, that this religious/secular divide within FBO analyses is unhelpful or inaccurate (Seidel, 2012; Clarke and Ware, 2015). Fountain (2013), for example argued that the “myth” of religious NGOs is an arbitrary category which simply serves to ‘Other’ or reify a group of organisations unnecessarily. This, along with the wealth of literature on the diversity of FBOs, suggests that the existing approach to studying FBOs is in need to refinement.

One popular method in approaching the vast, diverse field of FBOs in development in the initial years – as we have seen for the analysis of the discipline- has been to cast them into types and categories (Benedetti, 2006; McGinnis, 2006; Clarke and Ware, 2015). By sorting the organisations into groups based on aspect of their nature it was suggested that partnerships with donors, secular NGOs, governments etc. can be made more effective. For example, James (2009) worked to identify 10 areas in which religion made a difference, before suggesting that some typology of FBOs ought to be constructed on this basis to improve partnering and adapt development processes. But contrarily and in opposition to this to earlier calls for typologies, emerging since around 2010 is an emphasis on the vast diversity of FBOs (Ferris, 2011; Petersen, 2012). Recognizing the variety and complexity of these organisations, many authors have consequently called for further, detailed, contextualised research (Kirmani and Zaidi, 2010; Tomalin, 2012; Jennings, 2013). Jones and Petersen (2011), Jennings (2013) and Karam (2014) are all critical of the narrow focus involved in past attempts to categorize FBOs which they argue simply instrumentalise and over generalise a diverse, complex arena of organisations. Thus, we see calls from Bradley (2011) for example, who demands that ethnographic research is key to understanding the role of FBOs in social transformation.

As part of the new movement towards contextualization and nuance that has emerged since 2011, many authors called for a greater appreciation of the diversity of FBOs through empirical research. However, there are some less well-established topics in this area. From 2009 there has been interest in the role of faith within FBOs, although this is yet to cohere into a focused argument or debate (Clarke and Jennings, 2008; Landmark, 2013; Lemvik, 2013) and the conversation appears disparate with several avenues of argument as opposed to a concentrated debate. For example, Cochrane and Nawab (2012) stated that the religious beliefs undergirding an FBO significantly influence its organisational model. Kirmani and Zaidi (2010) argued that faith identity in FBOs is most strongly tied to funding and the principles of their donors, while Levy and Laundriault-Dupont (2013) suggested that religious identity does not necessarily operate at institutional level but is more a matter of its personnel. Hershey (2016) points out that in some cases the faith identity of an FBO does not show through in the programs they implement. De Kadt (2009) warns of the conflict that may arise from an FBO whose religion is the only, inflexible dimension of their identity.

The funding of FBOs is also beginning to be picked up by scholarship in more recent years. While Zaag (2013) and Brie et al (2015) have examined the advantage religious organisations hold in securing funding somewhat disproportionate to their profit-making, Hershey (2016) demonstrates that both faith-based and secular NGOs alike are constrained in their practice by funding. Clarke (2010) for example looked at donor biases - often towards mainstream Christian churches - which are only exacerbated by the boom in FBOs.



#### 4. Looking forward: possible indications of what is next in Religion and Development

Following the analysis of those past trends within RaD, this analysis now moves to identify new emerging thematic directions within the research agenda, that in many instances may differ from policy agendas. These trajectories extend some of the themes outlined above and beyond, with the potential to challenge the broader field of development studies and practice of international development in new ways. New areas of scholarship seem to follow those directions and they may be grouped around five emerging themes: Reflexivity, Sacred Spaces, Social Capital, Nexus and Power/Politics.

In recent publications there are calls for greater **reflexivity** in development: this is a relatively under-established, but significant theme. As well as calling into question key terms including ‘religion’ and ‘development’ themselves, (Jones and Petersen, 2011; Rew, 2011; Seidel, 2012; Barnett and Stein, 2012; Donnelly, 2013; Fountain, 2013; Carbonnier, 2013). We can see more pointed questions about the role and purpose of development (Jones and Petersen, 2011; Rew, 2011; Walsh, 2015). For example, what does development mean for different religious groups, and by extension how do religious groups engage with the ideology and practice of development? How can development engage not only with formal, organized religion but also with the power and realm of spirits and beliefs? There are many questions of this more existential nature that RaD has so far posed but as yet remain unengaged with. As part of this reflexive turn in development scholarship, we also see attention the dynamics of **power inherent to aid relationships** (Bradley, 2011). Rennick (2013), Johnston (2013) and Omer et al (2015) highlight the legacies of mission, secularisation, and especially colonialism as they argue for development agents to be conscious of the ethics of power in their work. Also relevant in this discussion is an argument raised by Connor (2011) who argues for the expansion of literature on RaD to include more “uncomfortable subject matter”. He states that religious development actors ought to take a more explicit, activist stance or else they risk “legitimizing cultures of exclusion” (p. 860). This suggestion has gone largely unanswered and may come to play a larger part as the discussion of development’s role/position unfolds. This, in a certain way, links with new studies that show how certain religious interpretations limit and obstruct development projects (as for example around reproduction, LGBT rights and HIV/AIDS). Focusing on the ‘uncomfortable matters’ of religion from a theoretical perspective will better equipped practical development to deal with relevant issues that affect so many people.

One growing theme emerging in more recent years (2014-2017) is the significance of **sacred spaces**. Bradley’s (2009) work on female victims of domestic violence receiving aid in the secure, familiar environment of a ritual space hinted towards religious space as a site for development work which was recently echoed by Clarke (b, 2016). Taking a kind of reverse approach, Van Dijk (2014) addressed the formation of religious spaces in response to situations of development need. Increased concern with urbanization processes has also brought issues of space to the forefront as religion has significant implications for spatial planning (Narayanan, 2015; Greed, 2016; Narayanan, 2016). With urbanization theory maintaining space as a point of interest, and clear indications of its importance to the experience of development, as well as presenting an interesting avenue methodologically, it may be anticipated that this theme will expand in upcoming literature. One instance of this Clarke’s (2017) work *Religions and development in the Asia-Pacific: Sacred spaces as development spaces*. This is an emerging area of scholarship with real overlap between religious practice and international development practice and an area where RaD can further engage in the future. This is in line with a growing interest in the relation between Religion and Space within other academic disciplines (mainly global studies, human geographies, anthropology, sociology, religious studies) that interconnect with development in several ways. In growing challenging

environments due to the growth of population, movements of people, changes in climate and over expansion of urban contexts, religious spaces acquire an even more particular value of continuation and protection in hostile changing contexts. All these are themes that will keep expanding in relation to the need to understand complex contexts in transformation.

Since 2014 we can discern a growing interest in the role of religion in the formation of ‘**social capital**’, defined by Butt as “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Butt, 2014, p.325). This is an area of concern also for Wheeler (2014) and Wilhelm (2014). In this new academic reflection, social capital seems to fit well within established conversations about how religion shapes sociality, how community culture can be shaped by religious identity with some public spheres becoming highly religionized (Dakson and Binns, 2012; Clarke, 2013; Bompani and Brown, 2014) and how this then affects the reception of development efforts (Clarke, 2016; Seyyed, 2016). Social capital may be a new concept within the RaD literature, but obviously not in development studies and international development where the concept has gained much traction but it still partly remains a loose and somewhat vague concept. Social capital is an important concept within development studies but in many instances it remains poorly theorized or understood (other than as something that should be improved or built) and the study of religion as a driver or hindrance of the production of social capital in different contexts can go some way to making our understanding of social capital in development studies tangible and empirically grounded.

A special issue of the *Canadian Journal for Development Studies* (Gordon, 2013; Zaag, 2013) raised the importance of understanding how development work shapes religious beliefs and practice as previous emphasis has been on how religion (generally dichotomously) enables or impedes development. This appears to be taken up within the ‘**nexus**’ or **interactional trend** and is likely to endure in future scholarship. As we have already discussed, in the past five years the literature has shown a shift towards a more holistic, transformational idea of development of which religion is said to be a key dimension (DfID, 2012; Ager, Abebe & Ager, 2014; Lokesh, 2014; Karam, 2014; Walsh, 2015). In 2015 we see the term ‘nexus’ presented by Narayanan (2015) used to describe this. Narayanan’s (2016) introduction to the special issue ‘Special issue on Religion, Sustainable Development and Policy: Principles to Practice’ in *Development in Practice* identifies five foci in this nexus: urbanization and spatial equality; gender justice; environment and human/animal tensions; economic growth; and post-secularity and governance. It is suggested that these foci ought to be unpacked using an interdisciplinary approach focused on religion which appreciates their interconnected nature and thus informs effective policy. These five themes, dominant within broader concerns regarding international development can frame and can be enriched by future works in RaD.

There is a growing literature looking to the **power religious groups have over political forces** (and this is different from the kind of influence that Religion had on democratization in the 90s in Africa according to Gifford’s work, 1995). Religious frameworks can provide a basis on which to evaluate, critique or support a given government and national policies, and religious groups may be powerful enough in size and cohesion to pose significant challenge. Where one form of religion is dominant in institutions, media etc., the public sphere may be strongly religionized, swaying government practice. Faith based actors, then, can be powerful agents for political change (Banchoff, 2008; Swart, 2010; Zalanga, 2010; Johnston, 2013; Van Klinken, 2015; Bompani and Brown 2014; Bompani and Valois 2018). Those publications ultimately and collectively challenge another overriding assumption, that is: development can be neutral, aloof from politics and power, and perhaps pushes us a bit further in reflecting on

whether religion itself can be distanced from highly politicized endeavors. Although development studies and international development posed the possibility of political neutrality with Right-based Approaches in the 90s and more recently with their interactions with Conflict and Peace Resolution studies, the neutrality assumption has not yet been systematically challenged. Development studies and its constituent disciplines should therefore reconsider one of the assumptions upon which they are, historically at least, often based: development and progress is neutral and that therefore religious actors will also use these ideas in a-political standardized unified way.

## **6. Conclusion**

An analysis of religion and development as a sub-discipline also allows us to reflect on religion in relation to the bigger framework of development studies from different home disciplines – religious studies, anthropology, politics, human geography – and not only from the starting point of development scholarship. In this way, it seems possible to trace a parallel between the emergence of RaD and the past emergence of development studies, as an academic discipline – in the beginning primarily focused around economic development - that was established alongside the emergence of the post-World War 2 international development sector.

Initially development studies emerged in support of the international development sector, generating relatively unproblematic data that was deemed necessary for development to happen. This then turned to a critique of international development in the late 60s and 70s as many of the promises, hopes and aspirations of international development began to fail – we can witness a turn towards scholarly debates on appropriate development, bottom up development, participation etc. as new conceptualisations that can develop more nuanced, context- and culture-bound understandings of the realities of both underdevelopment and development. These new and more critical conceptualisations drew more disciplines into the mix, political science, sociology and ethnography amongst others creating fertile conversations across and beyond disciplines and re-framing how we thought about development.

It seems that RaD in a way mirrors this path, in a much-accelerated way over a decade as opposed to several decades, moving from an impulse to capture and quantify religion towards understanding the complex relationships between religion and development in new and fruitful – and critical- ways. It is equally important to understand the rise of RaD within the broader intellectual moment in which it emerged - the era of post-development thinking; an era that called for alternative and multiple viewpoints and belief systems that challenged monolithic interpretations of what constituted ‘progress’ and ‘development’ (Escobar, 1995) and which subsequently enabled different organisations and actors to generate their own perspectives of development and in turn to provide alternative ways of intervening, delivering services and organising politics and social relationships in given communities (Sen, 1999).

RaD, therefore, had the tricky task of establishing itself as a sub-discipline that engaged with, contributed to, but perhaps also worked at times in contraposition to more mainstream development studies thought and international development practice. In the 1990s there were obvious synergies with post-development thinking and spaces where it became possible to engage with religion, but this had not yet led to the inclusion of religion.

There were also challenges in reaching beyond the mechanistic idea that engaging with religion (especially via FBOs) could provide an avenue to allow international development to deal with

post-development critiques. This generated a flux of interest and funding that had quite a negative impact on some religious organisations in the Global South, especially of a small scale, that were suddenly expected to function – and speak the jargon – of mainstream development organisations. These organisations were expected to function without the influence of religion and ‘behave’ as secular organisations discrediting their own nature – an object lesson in the appropriation of the religious by the secular.

These early problematic engagements with religion by international development, as opposed to active avoidance, mirror the emergence of RaD. For a long time religion was not a topic of concern within development studies, the early emergence of literature on RaD was low key and it took some time to gain mainstream acceptance within development studies. However, RaD has now gained traction and some acceptance. Its materiality and applicability in the field provides an important lesson to anyone interested in broader issues within development studies. Thus, we can see the emergence of RaD as a field of study that initially highlighted, recognized and quantified religion in a ‘not-too critical’ way, but then turned towards nuanced contextualizations and critical reflections that further challenged and pushed broader development thinking and practice.

This is an incredibly exciting moment to be involved in the study of religion and development, as it develops across and between disciplines and as it challenges and prompts us to think critically about fundamental issues of development, of faith, and of modernity. And of course, of what the discipline actually is and should be.

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